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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0124
INFO RUEHXL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001761

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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: GREEK FIRES: SEPT. 4 UPDATE

REF: ATHENS 1741 AND PREVIOUS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

11. (U) This message contains an action request -- see paragraph 9.

SUMMARY

12. (SBU) The Greek Fire Service has announced that all wild fires are now out. PM Karamanlis presented a recovery plan to the nation over the weekend, as did opposition PASOK's Papandreaou. FM Bakoyannis has tabled a proposal for improved EU cooperation in responding to natural disasters. EU Commission President Barroso visited Greece 9/1. A U.S. technical assistance team arrived September 2 and immediately began to liaise with Greek counterparts. End Summary.

Fires Out

13. (U) The Greek Fire Service has reported that the fires have now been extinguished. Provisionally, the Government of Greece estimates that 64 individuals were killed, and over 200,000 hectares of land were destroyed. International media note that one person has now died in hospital, bringing the death toll to 65. The Greek Ministry of Economy provisionally estimates that the damage will total about 1.6 billion Euro.

14. (U) PM Karamanlis and his government have been ubiquitous in personal and media appearances to demonstrate leadership in response to the crisis. Over the weekend, PM Karamanlis presented a recovery plan, toured damaged areas with European Commission President Barroso, and addressed the nation. The government's line remains clear -- the government will assist those affected and Greece will recover from this disaster. Karamanlis also publicly speculated on at least two occasions over the weekend that the fires were "not a coincidence" but provided no justification or facts to bolster this claim.

15. (U) Meanwhile, the Greek Government announced that a total of 45,600 individuals have received initial compensation, totaling 165,387,000 Euros. The Greek Finance Ministry announced that the European Investment Bank will make a 135 million USD long-term loan to Greece for reconstruction. The Greek Culture Ministry announced plans for restoration of the area surrounding ancient Olympia -- the birthplace of the ancient Olympics. Although the antiquities were not harmed by the fires, the surrounding area was severely damaged, and the Government plans to take steps to clear burnt vegetation, carry out repairs to the archaeological museum, and to replant the landscape.

Barroso Visit

16. (U) Following his tour of damaged areas with Karamanlis, Barroso told the press "Greece's problem is Europe's problem." Barroso said that the European Commission will help assess the damage caused to the economy and environment and will provide assistance to Greece; Barroso did not specify the level of assistance, but did say that the EU's Solidarity Fund would be "activated."

Greek Proposal for EU

17. (U) At the Sept. 3 meeting of EU ministers on European Neighborhood Policy, FM Bakoyannis tabled a proposal for a European "Rapid Reaction Force" to deal with natural disasters. The Greek proposal is for EU member states to designate assets for EU use in responding to natural disasters when required. Under the Greek proposal, the European Commission would also provide funding for some joint infrastructure for this "Rapid Reaction Force." Greek press

reports that the Portuguese EU Presidency has agreed to add this proposal to the agenda of the General Affairs meeting in October in Luxembourg.

U.S. Technical Assistance Team

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18. (U) A technical assistance team from U.S. Forest Service arrived Sept. 2 for a one-week mission which includes specialists in forest management and a Soil Conservation Rehabilitation Specialist. The team will tour areas in the Peloponnese Sept. 5 - 6 before returning for an out-brief on Sept. 7. The team hopes to continue dialogue and information exchange upon their return to the U.S. in an effort to assist the GoG in rehabilitation and mitigation of future disasters. Additionally, the first delivery of one case of personal protective equipment (out of twenty-one total cases comprising 3,000 individual sets) arrived at Athens Airport Sept. 4 today. We are planning a handover to the GoG tomorrow, Sept. 5.

Media Outreach - Action Request

19. (SBU) The Embassy's Sept. 3 press release on the team's arrival and additional donations to the Hellenic Red Cross received straightforward coverage by AP and in several major Greek newspapers. It has already generated requests for interviews with top American firefighter Tom Harbour from two serious, major Greek newspapers, one the general interest Kathimerini, and the other economic daily Express. ACTION REQUEST: We request USAID/OFDA clearance for Harbour to engage with Greek media during this visit.

110. (SBU) Separately, to address the international and Greek-American audiences, Charge is prepared to offer an interview to the Athens or New York office of The National Herald, the major Greek-American weekly newspaper, either before or after Deputy Secretary Negroponte's scheduled Wednesday, Sept. 5 interview with Greece's well-regarded Antenna TV, which we expect to air on Thursday, Sept. 6 locally. A/DCM and IO will also seek out opportunities to interview with English-language, expatriate-oriented local outlets.
COUNTRYMAN